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ABSTRACT

The parents of 746 children enrolled in grades from kindergarten through high school in 1985 were interviewed in a national study designed to identify factors affecting parent involvement in schools and education-related activities. Three kinds of parent involvement were measured: (1) willingness to visit the child's school three or more times during a year, or personalistic involvement; (2) active participation in a parent-teacher association, or supportive involvement; and (3) attentiveness to local school issues, or policy-oriented involvement. A logit analysis was conducted for each of these three types of involvement to develop three models of parental participation. The models revealed that the parent's gender was the strongest predictor of participation in all three cases, that the parent's educational level was a strong predictor of policy-oriented involvement, and that the child's grade level was a strong predictor of personalistic and supportive involvement. The demands placed on parents' time did not appear to affect the impact of gender on participation. Parents of younger children proved more child-oriented; this factor affecting participation appeared unrelated to gender or to parents' educational levels. The study suggests that parental involvement is a multidimensional construct that deserves further examination. (PGD)

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# Parental Involvement in the Schools:

# Causes and Effects

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## THE ISSUE OF PARENT PARTICIPATION

There is broad agreement in the literature (Gittell, Hoffacker, Rollins, & Foster, 1979; Grant, 1979; Miller, 1983, 1985; Minar, 1966; Salisbury, 1980; Summerfield, 1971) that parents are more likely to participate in school governance and school politics than other citizens in the community. Little attention has been paid, however, to which parents are most likely to become involved in local school affairs, to what form that participation might take, and what effect parental participation might have on evaluative attitudes toward the schools. This paper will address the issues of parental involvement in local school affairs, the form of that involvement, and its relationship to parental evaluation of the quality of local schools.

The question of which parents become involved in local school affairs has important policy and political implications. If one segment of the parent population is disproportionately involved in local school governance, it is likely that resulting policy decisions will reflect the interests and concerns of that group. If there are school issues with differential effects on students and segments of the community, it is important to understand the patterns of participation and the relationship of that involvement to policy outcomes.

At a practical political level, a better understanding of the sources of parent involvement may facilitate efforts to increase parental involvement in the schools. And, a better understanding of parent involvement may guide future research efforts in this area.

At the same time, it is clear that there are different forms of parental involvement in local schools. Some parents may seek to discuss or impact decisions concerning their own children while others may seek to modify system-wide policies and programs. Some parents may adopt service work, while others may play a more policy oriented or political role. And others may "follow" school issues without direct involvement with school staff or leadership. It is important to better understand which parents are most likely to engage in which kind of school involvement.

Finally, the small but growing volume of research focused on participation in school affairs has almost ignored the relationship of parental involvement to the evaluative attitudes toward the schools held by parents. In general, those parents with the highest levels of involvement in local school affairs should have the best view of the positive and negative aspects of local school programs. Leathem (1985) found that citizens who were attentive to local school politics were significantly more likely to favor increased educational spending than were other citizens. This analysis will examine the impact of attentiveness and other kinds of parental involvement on the evaluation of the quality of the local school program.

## SOME NEW DATA

The analysis reported in this paper is based on a national study sponsored by Family Circle magazine and conducted by the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University. The use of a national data set allows the testing of a number of hypotheses from the literature that have emerged from studies of single communities or a small number of communities. While the dearth of national studies of school politics is an understandable result of limited resource availability for this kind of work, it is important to recognize that, over the longer term, a literature that seeks to produce useful theory about school politics cannot be built entirely, or even predominately, on local case studies.

The Family Circle study collected interviews from 1515 adults in a national probability sample. The interviews were conducted by telephone from the Public Opinion Laboratory at Northern Illinois University and averaged about 40 minutes in length. A completion rate of 80 per cent was obtained for the study.

Each respondent was asked if they had ever had any children and, if so, how many. The respondent was then asked a short battery of items for each child. This process produced a set of information for 2746 children, ranging from pre-

school to adults in their 50's. To allow an analysis of child characteristics and child-parent relationships, a special analysis file was created that includes one record for each child identified in the study, with all of the relevant parent information attached to that record. For example, if a parent reported two children, two child records would have been created, including the unique data for that child and all of the other information provided by the parent in the balance of the interview. This type of file allows generalizations to all pre-schoolers, to the 1985 school population, or to other child cohorts.

For the purpose of this analysis, the child file for children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade was used. The file included a total of 746 child and parent records. Approximately 476 children were enrolled at the K-8 level and 270 in high school.

## THREE MEASURES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

For this analysis, three kinds of parent involvement have been identified and measured. The first type of involvement is the visit by a parent to their child's school to talk with a teacher or principal about their child. Almost all schools encourage periodic parent "conferences" with teachers, and some schools require parent-teacher meetings. For this analysis, parents were divided into those who visited their child's school three or more times during the preceding year versus those with fewer visits. Approximately 32 per cent of parents in the 1985 study had visited their child's school three or more times. In broad terms, this kind of involvement may be characterized as personalistic, focusing on the needs or problems of one's own child.

The second kind of involvement is active participation in a parent-teacher association. The 1985 study asked each respondent if they were an active member of a PTA, a member but not active, or not a member. Approximately 32 per cent of parents in the study were active in a local PTA group. In general terms, active involvement in a PTA may be characterized as a supportive kind of participation.

The third kind of involvement is interest in and concern about local school issues. Miller (1983, 1985) and Leathem

(1985) have classified those citizens who have a high level of interest in local school issues and who believe that they are very well informed about local school issues to be an attentive public for local schools. While 28 per cent of all citizens were attentive to local school issues in 1985, 43 per cent of parents were attentive to school issues. In general, this kind of involvement may be characterized as policy-oriented.

## SOME MODELS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The level of parental involvement in schools can be examined at two levels. It will be helpful to begin at the descriptive level and look at the proportion of parents involved in each of the three kinds of activities. At an analytic level, it will be helpful to construct multivariate models of involvement and to estimate the degree of association between each kind of involvement and each of the independent variables included in the study.

In broad terms, about a third of parents visited their child's school three or more times during the preceding year to talk to teachers and administrators about their child, about a third of parents claimed to be active members of a parent-teacher association, and 43 per cent of parents qualified as attentive to local school issues (see Table 1). Overall, the pattern is far short of the ideal of universal parent interest and involvement, but it is a respectable level of participation in the context of other rates of participation in our society. Only 50 per cent of eligible adults bother to vote in presidential elections.

Looking at the levels of involvement for selected segments of the parent population, it appears that college-educated mothers of elementary school students are the most like-

ly to visit school, be active in the PTA, and be attentive to school issues. In general, a higher proportion of parents of elementary school children tended to be involved in school visits and PTA than comparable parent groups of high school students. In regard to attentiveness to local school issues, however, the difference between elementary and high school parents narrows for most segments and there was no significant difference between college-educated fathers of elementary and high school students. It also appears that mothers, regardless of the level of their own education or the grade level of their student, were more likely to be involved in school affairs than were fathers.

TABLE 1

Parental Involvement in School Activities: 1985

| Gender | Education | Grade Level | Visited 3+ times | Active in PTA | Attentive to schools | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| female | no college | elem | 48% | 40% | 55% | 199 |
| | | high | 22 | 26 | 45 | 106 |
| | college | elem | 68 | 71 | 73 | 45 |
| | | high | 32 | 32 | 48 | 23 |
| male | no college | elem | 25 | 28 | 28 | 159 |
| | | high | 17 | 15 | 17 | 85 |
| | college | elem | 31 | 32 | 45 | 73 |
| | | high | 14 | 16 | 50 | 56 |
| All parents..... | | | 32 | 32 | 43 | 746 |

It is apparent from these descriptive results that at least two independent variables have strong effects on the type and level of parental involvement in their schools. But, how much influence should be assigned to gender and how much to the grade level of the student? Which is a stronger predictor of involvement? To answer these questions, it is necessary to construct a set of log-linear logit models[1].

A logit analysis was conducted for each of the three types of involvement and the degree of association of each independent variable with the dependent variable (holding constant the other independent variables) was measured using the Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination (CMPD). The CMPD is analogous to a multiple R squared and refers to the proportion of the total mutual dependence[2] associated with or explained by each independent variable, holding constant the other independent variables.

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[1] The log-linear logit method is described by Goodman (1978) and Fienberg (1980). In general terms, a log-linear logit model is analogous to a regression model, except that the logit model seeks to predict cell frequencies in a multidimensional contingency table whereas a regression model seeks to predict a point for each case in a multidimensional space.

[2] Mutual dependence is a term coined by Goodman (1978) and is analogous to variance in interval measurement. Goodman argues that two variables in a contingency table that have no relationship are called independent, thus two variables that are related should be referred to as mutually dependent. The natural log of the difference between the estimated and actual cell frequencies is referred to as mutual dependence. Goodman urges the use of this term rather than variance, which should be reserved for interval measures.

An examination of the logit models found that gender was the strongest predictor of all three kinds of involvement, with women being more likely to have visited school, become active in the PTA, and qualified as attentive to local school issues (see Table 2). The level of education completed by the parent accounted for only seven per cent of the mutual dependence in regard to school visits and 14 per cent in regard to active PTA involvement, but education accounted for almost a third of the mutual dependence in the prediction of attentiveness to local school issues. This pattern of association suggests that education is a more important influence in regard to policy level issues, but that it has substantially less influence on particularistic contacting or the provision of general support services.

TABLE 2

Three Basic Logit Models to Predict Involvement

| | Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Effect of..... | Visited 3+ times | Active in PTA | Attentive to schools |
| Gender | .479 | .418 | .657 |
| Education | .073 | .140 | .321 |
| Grade Level | .432 | .397 | .079 |
| Total Main Effects | .931 | .877 | .899 |

The effect of grade level was differentiated among the three kinds of involvement. Parents of elementary children were significantly more likely to have visited the school of their child three or more times during the previous year and to be an active PTA worker, and this difference accounted for about 40 per cent of the total mutual dependence in those two models (see Table 2). In contrast, there was only a minimal difference between elementary school and high school parents in attentiveness to local school issues. This result suggests that while high school parents do not visit teachers or work in a PTA at the same level as the parents of younger students, they do keep up with policy level school issues as well as elementary school parents.

In all three models, the direct -- or main -- effects of gender, education, and grade level accounted for about 90 per cent of the total mutual dependence in the analysis. This level of fit in a model indicates that there were no significant interactions among the independent variables.

In summary, a comparison of these three basic models indicates that mothers are significantly more likely to be involved in school activities than fathers and that elementary school parents are more likely to be involved in visiting and support activities than the parents of high school children. In regard to policy concerns, however, mothers are significantly more likely to be attentive to school issues than fathers and better educated parents are somewhat more likely to

be attentive to local school issues, but the grade level of the child makes no difference in regard to interest in and knowledge about policy issues.

## THE TIME HYPOTHESIS

One explanation of differential levels of parental involvement in school activities concerns the time pressures felt by parents. Some parents hold demanding full-time jobs and some parents must travel substantial distances to and from work each day. The stereotype of the suburban commuting father who leaves home early in the morning and returns on the last train in the evening is imbedded in our literature and our thinking. Miller (1983b) developed an extensive argument pertaining to the effect of time demands on attentiveness to public policy issues.

To measure time pressure, the 1985 study asked each respondent to indicate the number of hours worked each week in all jobs held and the number of hours per week devoted to travel to and from work. After an examination of the resulting distribution, parents were divided into those whose work and travel responsibilities required 50 or more hours each week and those with smaller time commitments to work. A third of the parents in the 1985 study devoted 50 or more hours to work and travel each week.

To assess the marginal contribution of time pressure on parental involvement, the dichotomous work time variable was

added to each of the three models discussed above. This procedure allows an examination of both its marginal contribution to the prediction of each type of involvement as well as an assessment of its impact on (or relationship to) the independent variables.

The results found that the amount of time devoted to work and work-related travel had little effect on parental involvement (see Table 3). The level of work time accounted for only three per cent of the mutual dependence in regard to school visits, five per cent in regard to attentiveness, and one per cent in regard to PTA involvement. Again, the combined effects of all of the main effects indicated that all three of the models were good fits.

TABLE 3

Logit Models to Assess the Effect of Work Time on Involvement: 1985

| | Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Effect of..... | Visited 3+ times | Active in PTA | Attentive to schools |
| Gender | .441 | .225 | .331 |
| Education | .057 | .120 | .296 |
| Grade Level | .377 | .310 | .070 |
| Work Time | .033 | .009 | .049 |
| Total Main Effects | .862 | .697 | .810 |

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL SKILL HYPOTHESIS

A second hypothesis to explain differential rates of parental involvement in the schools concerns the different levels of previous experience and skill in organizations held by parents. A substantial body of political science literature has found that citizens with more organizational experience are more likely to participate in a wide range of public affairs activities than citizens with less experience.

In a similar vein, it is reasonable to speculate that parents with a higher level of organization experience or skill would be more likely to become involved in school affairs. To test this hypothesis, a simple measure of organizational experience was constructed. The 1985 study asked each respondent whether they were an active member, a member but not active, or not a member of each of several community groups and organizations. The organizations included a fraternal group, a service club, a veterans group, a literary or drama group, a sport or recreational group, a business or professional group, and a women's group. Parents who were active in three or more of these organizations were classified as having a higher level of organizational experience than those with fewer active memberships. About 38 per cent of parents were included in the higher organizational experience group.

Using the same analytic approach as before, the results indicated that a higher level of organizational experience was strongly related to school visits, but only weakly associated

with PTA participation or attentiveness to school issues (see Table 4). The results point to some other interesting and important relationships among the independent variables. The impact of gender declined sharply, indicating that some of the previously noted gender difference reflected a difference in organizational experience. Similarly, the reduction of the influence of the education variable to zero suggests that the difference in organizational experience parallels the difference in formal education, thus when one variable is held constant, the influence of the other is eliminated. Given the relationships between gender, education, and organizational experience, the role of grade level became more pronounced, ultimately accounting for 77 per cent of the total mutual dependence in the model.

TABLE 4

Logit Models to Assess the Effect of Organizational Skill on Involvement: 1985

| | Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Effect of..... | Visited 3+ times | Active in PTA | Attentive to schools |
| Gender | .395 | .080 | .382 |
| Education | .047 | .000 | .121 |
| Grade Level | .017 | .772 | .233 |
| Organizational Experience | .378 | .060 | .035 |
| Total Main Effects | .836 | .957 | .799 |

The finding that involvement in the PTA is not associated with previous organizational experience is surprising. This result suggests that it is not the organizational environment that attracts parents to PTA activities, but the purpose or child-relatedness of the group. Further, this finding suggests that the attraction or pull of a PTA is sufficiently strong to overcome the barriers that lead to generally lower organizational involvement by some parents.

Overall, the total main effects of the three models indicate that all three models have a good fit. There were no significant interactions among the independent variables in any of the three models.

## THE CHILD ORIENTATION HYPOTHESIS

A final hypothesis argues that some parents are more child-oriented than others and that it is this child-orientedness that accounts for parent involvement in school affairs. The roots of child-orientedness is a subject beyond the scope of this analysis, but most educational professionals have long recognized its existence.

For the purpose of this analsis, an index of child orientation was constructed. Each parent received one point on the index if they reported that they:

1. spent two or more hours reading to their children each week,

2. spent two or more hours each week transporting children,
3. coached a youth athletic team or served as an adult leader for a youth group,
4. spent three or more hours each week playing with their children,
5. spent three or more hours each week in recreational activities with their children,
6. made two or more family visits to a museum, zoo, or similar facility during the previous six months,
7. worried about the safety of their child at school,
8. worried about the safety of their child in their neighborhood,
9. worried about alcohol use by their child,
10. worried about other drug abuse by their child,
11. worried about the possibility of sexual abuse of their child,
12. worried about the possibility of kidnapping of their child,
13. worried about sexual behavior among teenagers.

Parents with a score of four or more on this index were classified as more child oriented than other parents.

This index was entered into the base model and the results indicated that the child orientedness index was a reasonably good predictor of school visits and of PTA involvement, but that it had little association with attentiveness to

local school issues (see Table 5). The retention of a high level of predictive power by gender indicates that child-orientedness is not uniquely associated with either gender. In a similar manner, the retention of about the same levels of educational influence found in the base model suggests that child-orientedness is not uniquely associated with any level of formal education.

TABLE 5

Logit Models to Assess the Effect of Child Orientedness on Involvement: 1985

| | Coefficient of Multiple-Partial Determination | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Effect of..... | Visited 3+ times | Active in PTA | Attentive to schools |
| Gender | .407 | .293 | .508 |
| Education | .060 | .081 | .233 |
| Grade Level | .006 | .150 | .068 |
| Child Orientation | .386 | .220 | .050 |
| Total Main Effects | .849 | .799 | .804 |

In contrast, the sharp reduction of the influence of grade level in the prediction of school visits and PTA involvement indicates that elementary school parents tend to display a higher level of child-orientedness, as measured by this index. This result may reflect an elementary bias in the index or an emotional separation between parents and their

children during the high school years. A careful examination of the index will indicate that there are sufficient numbers of items for both levels to have scored as child-oriented. While it is true that high school parents do not read to their high school students very often, it is equally true that elementary school parents are less likely to worry about alcohol, drug abuse, or sexual behaviors than the parents of older students. The issue of a decline of child-orientedness with increasing age deserves further analysis.

In summary, these models suggest that parents who are child-oriented and mothers (regardless of child-orientedness) are significantly more likely to visit their child's school or become involved in PTA activities than other parents. Some of the predictive power previously attributed to grade level now appears to reflect the degree of child-orientedness.

## THE ATTITUDINAL EFFECT OF INVOLVEMENT

The preceding sections of this paper have examined a series of models to predict parental involvement in selected school activities. It is often assumed that high levels of parent involvement in the school will lead to more positive parental assessments of the performance of the schools. The 1985 data offer an opportunity to examine that hypothesis.

In the 1985 study, each parent was asked to evaluate the quality of the schooling received by each child. A zero to 10 thermometer was used, with 10 representing the "best that a school could be" and zero representing the worst that a school could be. For the purpose of this analysis, parents giving a score of nine or 10 to their child's school were classified as more positive and parent giving lower scores were classified as less positive. Approximately 42 per cent of the parents in the 1985 study gave scores of nine or 10.

Using the same logit approach, a simple model was constructed using each of the three kinds of involvement measured above as independent variables to predict the attitude of the parent toward the quality of their child's school. The results indicated that only active involvement in the PTA was associated with a more positive view of the child's school, accounting for about 31 per cent of the total mutual depen-

dence (see Table 6). Attentiveness to local school issues accounted for an additional eight per cent of the mutual dependence and school visits accounted for virtually no mutual dependence.

TABLE 6

A Logit Model to Predict Parental Assessment of School Quality: 1985

| Effect of .... | CMPD |
|---|---|
| Visiting child' school 3 or more times. | .002 |
| Being an active PTA member. | .307 |
| Being attentive to local school issues. | .075 |
| Total Main Effects | .542 |

The combined effects of the three kinds of involvement accounted for 54 per cent of the total mutual dependence in the analysis. This is a reasonably good fit by most standards, but not nearly as good as the models that predicted the levels of involvement.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What can we conclude from these analyses? Let me suggest five conclusions.

First, it is clear that parental involvement in the schools is a multidimensional construct and that a single dimensional index cannot capture it adequately. It is likely that there are additional dimensions beyond the three described in this study, but a single dimensional measure of parental involvement should be avoided.

Second, the analyses indicate that mothers are significantly more likely to be involved in all facets of school affairs than fathers. This difference persisted even when work-related time demands were entered into the model, suggesting that the difference is more role related than circumstantial.

Third, college-educated parents are significantly more likely to follow school policy issues than non-college educated parents. The level of formal education was unrelated to either school visits or active involvement in the PTA.

Fourth, elementary school parents appear to be more child-oriented than high school parents and this child-orientedness accounts for a significant portion of the differences in school visiting and PTA involvement. Child-orientedness does not appear to be related to gender or level of formal education.

Finally, the results reported in this paper raise a number of interesting and important questions that merit further study. Future studies of parental involvement should seek to retain the national character of the data sets, but increase the number of parents included in the study to allow the investigation of larger and more sophisticated models.

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